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WHY NOT HAVE TRAVELING LIBRARIES?

Farmers and Their Families in Twenty-Nine States Now Have Such Advantages, but Few in the South—A Good Reform for the Farmers' Union and All Farmers to Help Along—The System Explained.

By Louis R. Wilson, Librarian, University of North Carolina.

EMERSON once said that one could remain within the limits of a modest country seat and yet be much traveled and widely cultured. Better still, in his comparatively home-keeping though surpassingly full life, he exemplified the significant idea to which he gave utterance. To him the two means of traveling abroad in thought and of acquiring a wide knowledge of the facts and things common to his every day world, while yet remaining at home in body, were books and nature. Through these he became familiar with the facts of life and came to recognize back of all natural objects and of life itself a divinity shaping them and unifying them into a satisfactory whole.

LOUIS R. WILSON.

Twenty-Nine States Have Traveling Libraries.

In order that home life—home life in the country especially—might be enriched and the outlook of the country fireside extended beyond the bars and over the hills to the great outside world, and that a fuller knowledge of home life itself might be made possible, the traveling library has been established and is being operated in 29 States.

The traveling library system is a very simple thing. A State creates a special commission by legislative enactment. Ordinarily it is composed of teachers, librarians, and others who have demonstrated marked ability in directing the reading of children and communities. They serve without pay, but are empowered to employ a trained library secretary and assistants to carry on the active work necessary in operating the libraries. The State appropriates a given amount of money for the purchase of books and maintenance. The books are carefully selected by the secretary and the commissioners after they have considered carefully the interests of all those whom the traveling collections are intended to serve. Then they are made up in cases of from 25 to 50 volumes and are ready for distribution upon proper application. Usually the commission maintains a public office in the State library at the Capitol from which the cases are sent out free of charge except for transportation. The borrowers usually pay this.

Special and General Collections

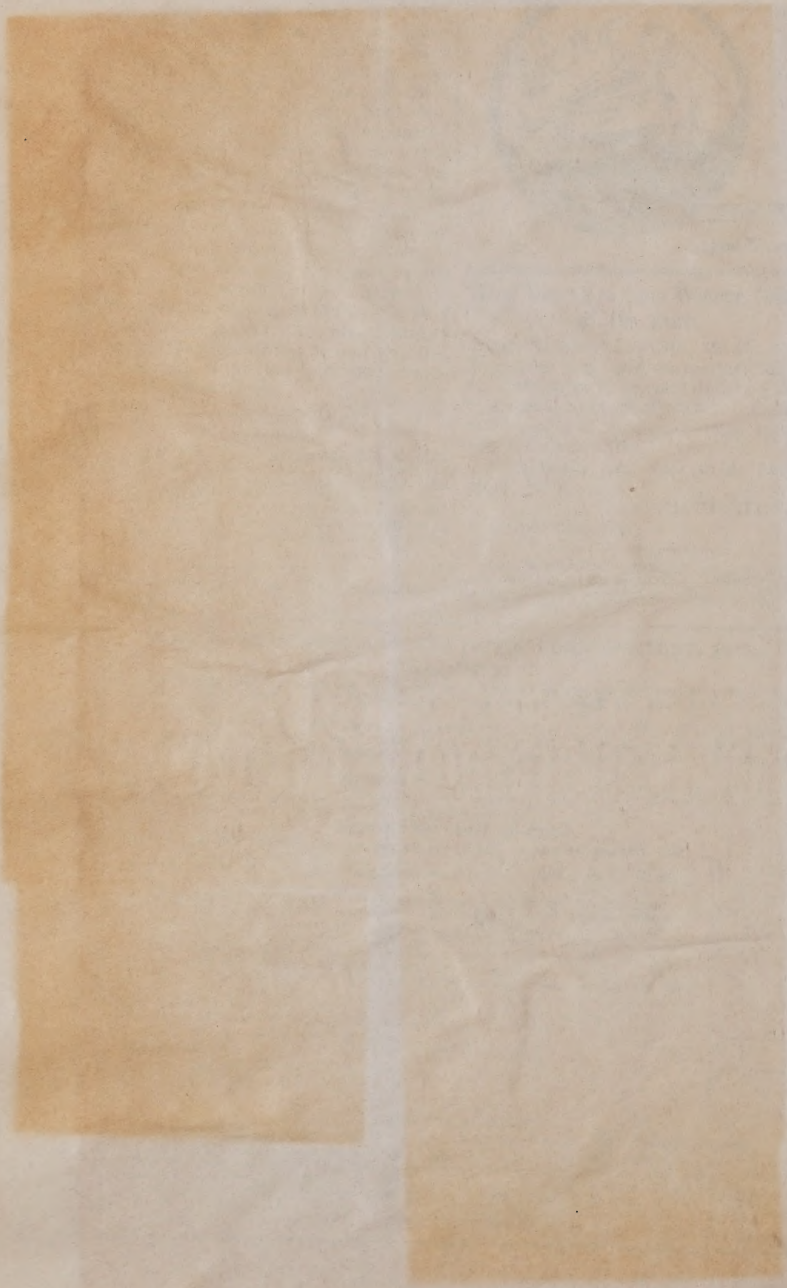
Upon request special collections can be secured to meet special needs. A debating library or a reference library can be sent to a village school. A public health library can be sent to a community interested in the suppression of preventable diseases. A gardening library can be sent to a group of truckers, thus enabling the State to make more effective the work of the departments of education, health and agriculture, and cementing all into a more helpful, related union. Ordinarily, however, the libraries are sent in less specialized form and are for the public use of:

1. Rural settlements which have no library facilities.

2. Schools which have small collections and are consequently in need of supplementing from the outside if they are to be kept fresh and interesting.

3. Villages or towns which have not established public libraries but for which the collections thus sent may become the centers around which public libraries will spring up.

4. High schools, special study clubs, local associations, etc., which are in need of richer reference collections or desire a few special books



on special subjects but do not feel justified in purchasing the books outright.

The libraries are usually kept for from three to six months. At the end of the period they are sent back to the commission to be replaced by another. In this way each community having a library association or station is kept supplied with new, interesting books, and the books are read by from one to two dozen communities before they are worn out. Sometimes shipments of magazines, pictures and stereopticon views are also sent along with the books to add to their variety and attractiveness.

Time for the South to Wake Up.

In the Southern States the very great benefits to be derived from this system have not been generally enjoyed, primarily because the people have not known that books could be supplied in this way and at very little expense to the State. They have not realized that a part of the State's revenues can be as legitimately used in providing a public library of this nature for the citizens of the State at large as the revenues of a city may be in the maintenance of a library for its citizens. The principle is the same. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama and Texas have library commissions of very recent establishment, but only Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky have set aside funds in any sense adequate to make the operation of the system effective. The other commissions have a very few special libraries, but their appropriations do not admit of the operation of extensive systems. The use of these, however, is such as to demonstrate clearly the need for more generous appropriations for this purpose.

In other sections conditions are better. In Massachusetts the State Agricultural College aids the commission by sending out the special agricultural libraries. Kansas owns 35,000 volumes and has 525 cases in constant circulation. Ohio spends $10,000 the year for similar purposes and New Jersey's 237 collections were so operated in 1910 that the aggregate of 40,570 volumes loaned were read by 118,500 borrowers in different sections of the State.

How the Plan Would Work.

Two practical questions present themselves in this discussion: (1) How can communities make use of such systems? and (2) How to get them started in States now without them.

The answers in both instances are simple.

Groups of rural tax payers, rural schools, special study clubs and village library associations are usually the beneficiaries of such systems. Application blanks are furnished upon request by the library commissions or State libraries. If a group of rural tax payers wishes the loan of a library, five or ten of its members form a library association, sign the application blank and agree to be responsible for the library while it is in their possession, to pay transportation charges on it to and from the issuing office and to place it in the home of a librarian whom they name where the books may be accessible, free of charge, to the whole community. The applications are filed in the order of their receipt and the collections are sent out for three months, four months or six months as the issuing office may determine. When the period expires the library is returned and a fresh one with different volumes is sent to take its place. If a school wishes to use the system, the school committeemen are made the responsible board and the teacher is usually chosen as librarian. In a similar way special study clubs and library associations in small towns may be organized and upon application may receive special or general collections as their needs require. The whole plan is exceedingly simple and its value lies in the fact that for a comparatively small appropriation on the part of the State and for a small transportation charge borne by the community the varied services of a free public library may be carried to the hearthstone of every citizen of a whole State.

How to Get Such Service in Your State

We now come the immediately practical question for the majority of The Progressive Farmer readers, which is, How to get the service in States that have not provided such advantages for their rural population? In Virginia and Tennessee the State libraries have already been empowered, legally, to operate such systems, and in North Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, and Texas, State Library Commissions have been formally established by law for the same purpose, but only in Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee has anything like adequate financial support been provided to make their operation possible. The question is one of getting funds from the States to purchase the books, provide the cases, and pay the clerical force for the management of the systems. Virginia began the work in 1905-06 with an appropriation of $7,500 and an annual appropriation of $2,500 since. Kentucky has spent $6,000 annually since June, 1910, for similar purposes. Since 1909, Tennessee has sent traveling collections to schools, but has not extended the service to other groups. In other of the Southern States the appropriations are negligible and in some neither the machinery nor the financial support has been provided.

To change this condition, it is necessary that all who are interested in this form of library extension and who would profit by it, unite in their demand upon the respective States for this special service. Agitate the matter through your farmers' organizations, Woman's Betterment Associations, and by personally urging the matter upon your legislators.